

TIME TO CHOOSE

SHORT STORIES

For adults and children

By

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FIRST PUBLISHED 2014

<u>Time to Choose</u>	3
<u>The Agent Mool Reports</u>	8
<u>Eve and Adam</u>	14
<u>Into the Misty Mountains</u>	16
A Mesolithic Afternoon	21
<u>Initiation</u>	25
<u>The Answer to Human Aggression?</u>	29
The Princess and the Pearls	32

TIME TO CHOOSE

On most days I walk across a lonely heath by the sea, to fetch wood for the fire, or just to walk the dogs. Usually I never see anybody there, but one day recently was very exceptional. What happened was so unusual that I realised I must record it. It was spring, not a beautiful day, grey but dry with birdsong on the air and a light breeze.

The first odd thing that drew my attention was a red and white post in amongst the heather. I would have noticed it if it had been there before. I assumed someone was doing some measuring or something as it was like a surveying post, only shorter. I hadn't seen anybody, and there were no cars where people usually park. I looked around, but did not see any more posts, or people. I pulled it out of the ground easily, only a few inches were pushed in. It was made of plastic, and I thought the top might have had a light in, though it was not on. I didn't like it there; it was a bright imposition on the quiet colours of the heath. So, noting where it had been, I threw it under a thick gorse bush where it could not be seen. My thought was that if it were important to someone they would have to ask me about it. My cottage is the obvious one to ask at, and then I would have a chance to find out what it was for. I thought it must be a research project I might find interesting. Although the National Trust owns the land I feel a bit responsible and I always like to know what's going on around the area.

I continued my walk and then I saw a person coming up the slope towards me from the direction of the sea. I couldn't make out if it was a man or woman. Not sure how to react, I whistled Jess and Bonnie to me and dropped down among the heather and low gorse, I knew I would not be obvious in my dull green clothes. The figure wore boots with very thick soles, a bit like the moon boots that were fashionable in the seventies, and a brownish-greenish all over suit with a silky sheen. I thought the person must be foreign as that style is not seen here. The figure was heading towards the place I had found the post, and I began to feel rather embarrassed, wishing I had left it, because the person was clearly looking for it.

The dogs were watching and sniffing intently, but did not seem afraid, so I walked up slowly behind, unnoticed. The person was walking up and down in the rough growth, searching and not finding. Then Jess reached him or her and the person jumped with shock, and turned round quickly.

I smiled reassuringly and asked, "Have you lost your post?"

"Yes, where is it please? I must know where." I still could not guess if it was a man or woman, I didn't recognise the strange accent though the speech was fluent.

"Well," I hesitated, "what was it marking, are you measuring or what?"

"It was marking the spot, I must know exactly where, the place is very important. I am sure it was in this flattish area, but it doesn't seem as flat as I remember." The person seemed terribly agitated; I came closer and looked into the eyes, still wondering about the gender.

"I'm sorry, I moved it, but I didn't know what it was for. Look, I live here and I like to know what is going on. Have you arranged this survey with the National Trust? Say I'm nosy if you like, but I feel I have a right to know."

"Oh no!" The person appeared to be on the verge of tears, "I'll be stuck here,

I haven't got long, and I wasn't supposed to see anyone, and not to talk if I could help it."

"Well you can't help it can you? I can find where your post was, but you'll have to tell me what it's for first." We stared at each other in silence, deadlock.

Trying to sound less confrontational, I asked, "I'm really curious to know what this is all about, and who you are. I've never seen anyone quite like you before, I will help you, but tell me, are you a man or a woman, and where are you from?"

The exasperated reply was "Ooooh, you're not supposed to know anything about this. I'll be right out of your way when I know where the marker was." I didn't answer, I just waited. The stranger checked the time and looked pleadingly at me. I didn't move or waver. I was going to get answers.

"I'm not going to help you unless you satisfy my curiosity, do you understand?"

"You won't understand, and nobody's supposed to know anything about this."

"You can't just turn up here and poke posts about with out anyone knowing. Sure this was common land once, but you're certainly not local. You've no right! Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Well then, I don't know what I'm to do. I'm a eunuch, they're common where I come from, and freer. Now, where's the Marker?"

"There aren't any eunuchs now, it's against civil liberties! Where is there such a place?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand. You're not expected to or supposed to! Where is my marker, pleeease?"

"I can help you, but unless you try to explain what this is all about I won't tell you where your marker is. I will listen and try to understand."

"OK, I'm running out of time. Where I come from the eunuchs have liberty, the whole men have to be kept under control, in case they can't control themselves. Men are not be trusted, and their functions are very limited, they impregnate women, and, er, entertain them. We are the workers and keep everything running smoothly. Not having rampant hormones means we are useful and reliable." He stopped speaking and looked at me, hoping he had satisfied my curiosity.

I was dumbfounded, but asked "Where, for god's sake is there such a society?" We engaged each other's eyes tightly, and I knew. "I mean when?"

"Please don't tell anybody, anyway, no one would believe you, you know that don't you? This is our first trial. The idea of using wormholes came about this time, have you heard of it?" I nodded. "We seem to have worked it, a woman could not try the first time in case it went wrong. But it does work, because I am certainly in an earlier time. Now at least I can confirm it, what date is it please?"

"It's 1998, March the 17th, when are you from?"

"2149, the same date, but unless I'm in the spatial locus within," he looked at his watch, "five minutes, the experiment will appear a failure, even though it's worked. Of course the return may still not work, but I must give it a chance." He gazed around the heath, taking in the sea and the mountains. I saw longing in his gaze. "I only had one hour here and it is so beautiful, so quiet and tranquil. Is much of your land like this?" He breathed in deeply, his face looked very clear and peaceful suddenly. He looked at me with laughter in his eyes and said. "I wouldn't mind staying, you can forget the marker if you like. Would I be able to live here, get a job? It is in your hands is it not? Since eunuchs are the unusual ones here, perhaps I could be a plaything, like men in my time."

I couldn't help laughing, the situation was so completely absurd and unlikely. "Maybe I could go in your place. I would be of interest wouldn't I? It sounds like women have much better status than now. I would love to know what it's like in 2149! Then they could swap us back."

He laughed too and said "If only! We have no idea of how accurately we can find times yet. They might not send you back, or you might come back a few years out, and someone else is living in your house?"

"I could risk it, but could be hard for you, when people find out when you're from. You could be famous, everyone would want to know about the future. You might be able to blend in, just be another eccentric incomer. Look here's your post," I reached under the gorse bush, "and I have my foot on the hole it was in - here."

"Oh thank you! I think the devil you know is best don't you? I will be a celebrity when I return, important in history too. And I have very interesting work, I love it. The women are nearly always kind and considerate. It is safer, and important to science and progress that I return." He moved towards the locus. I pushed the post in its hole and braced my body on it, realising I only had a minute to learn the secrets of time travel and the future.

"How do you keep the wormhole stable and open, and how are you not spaghettified?"

"I cannot answer your technical questions, for I am only an assistant in the work. Please, the time is now."

I wondered whether he would try to physically move me. He did not look well muscled, but it was hard to tell through his loose overalls, but he was taller than me. He took my hand in his and I looked into his worried eyes, aware that this was probably the greatest opportunity of my life, and the most extraordinary experience.

The heath disappeared; I was exhilarated and frightened at the same time. I was aware of a bustle of ideas that weren't mine, my mind felt overwhelmed with strangeness. I tried to concentrate on the environment instead, but there didn't seem to be one. All was light, with nothing to focus on. Shadows and variations appeared, the surroundings came into focus. I was in something like a lift, and the door slid open. A startled woman stared at me and started to explain. An authoritative voice interrupted, asking, "What was the year when you left?"

"...1998." I was immediately interrupted: "1998, that's definitely in the window! We've done it!"

I started babbling, feeling guilty and panicky about what I'd done. "It wasn't his fault, I made him, and I left him no choice because I'm stronger, physically. He can stay in my cottage till I get back. I'm sure he'll get used to the animals, they're very friendly. Really, I'm sure he'll be alright." I looked around and realised they were hardly listening to my words, but were examining me and my clothes with scientific fascination. So I took in what was new too, which was everything.

The appearance of the electronic equipment was quite beautiful. The LCD displays and indicators shone in different colours, I wondered if the colours were a code, a very complicated one. The keyboards were part of an undulating console that filled the entire space I had entered. The casing material was soft green and had different finishes in different places. I could imagine the juxtapositions making stylish jewellery.

The women's accents were much like the eunuch I had just met. Someone touched me to get my attention. I looked at her unadorned beauty and smiled. "Yes,

sorry, what was that?" I said.

"I don't know what you're doing here, but we have no accuracy at all yet, we can't risk sending you back. You've made this very complicated . . . but interesting." She smiled and looked round at her colleagues, who all looked interested. "Uh huh," I thought, "He was right, I'm a wonderful new curiosity. I wonder how curiosities get treated." I need not have worried, curiosities are very valuable here.

After an exchange I couldn't follow I was led into an adjoining room that was furnished for comfort. I was invited to sit. The woman who seemed to be in charge asked me if I would like a nice cup of tea, before I could reply all the women burst out laughing. I blushed, fearing that if I said yes, as I was inclined to, they would laugh all the more. Seeing my anxiety they quietened down, and assured me I could have tea if wanted. Or would I like something else, was I hungry? Unsure, I said tea would be lovely. I was handed a steaming cup, much quicker that it takes to make tea in our world. I drank it very gratefully; it seemed so normal and comforting. The women chattered incomprehensibly while I kept my gaze on the tea.

When I felt a bit more relaxed I looked up. The woman smiled reassuringly and said clearly "Better?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Name's Zandra, yours?"

"Oriole" I answered. Zandra introduced the others but I couldn't take them in. I did notice they were all slim, taller than me, well proportioned and beautiful. They were distinguishable easily enough, they varied a lot in skin colour and makeup and hair colour and style. Their clothes were quite similar though, I wasn't sure if they wore a uniform with differences for rank or job or something, or just a current fashion.

I became aware of how I must look to them. My clothing must seem very clumsy, my hair was as usual a tangle, and I'm much shorter and not symmetrically beautiful by any means. I felt a bit like a bag lady suddenly finding herself on a catwalk with everyone looking.

To calm myself I concentrated on my tea while they discussed me. These people were all scientists and technicians, they seemed to want to pass me on to sociologists. One left the control centre to organise that I think. After a while another woman entered, a flash of shock crossed her face before she smiled kindly, held out her hand and gently led me out of the control centre. She took me to a small interview room where I sat in another comfortable chair. She asked if I would like anything to eat. In my nervous state I couldn't imagine eating.

"Would you like to explain what happened?" She said slowly and deliberately. I described as best I could. She seemed to understand my English.

"What do you think so far?" she asked brightly.

"I'm gobsmacked! I mean surprised, I want to understand." I stammered.

"Of course you do. You were right, you have arrived in your future and we are experimenting with time travel. This is the first time we have successfully sent a person back in time, and the first time someone has returned. Although it has not worked as we planned we are fascinated to have you here. We will have a lot to ask you, if you would like to tell us about your world."

"I'm happy to, if you will tell me about yours."

"Information from our time to yours could have unplanned consequences. We will have to discuss this. It is an unexpected situation for us!"

"Don't worry, no one would believe me!"

“That’s an interesting observation, and may be true.”

“And what about the guy, person, that’s now at my place, and time? We will have to swap back won’t we?”

“That would be best, but this new to us. There is some risk involved still.”

“Your first trial worked though, didn’t it?”

“Not as we expected! You are right, the technology worked that time.”

Then I was asked to explain various things about what it’s like here in our time. I’m sure they have lots of records. She concentrated on odd little details. She wanted to know how often we drink tea, and else we drink. She was surprised I didn’t drink fizzy soft drinks for instance. How common vegetarianism was, how many burgers and fries I ate. I did tell her we call fries chips. She realised I found this awfully boring, but was hesitant about telling me about her world. I reminded her that no one would believe my story and she need not worry. I tried asking questions.

“In a research project like this, there would be as many men as women, I haven’t seen any men yet, why is that?” She hesitated before answering evasively, “We always use the personnel most suited to the job.”

“So in what jobs are there more men than women?” I asked.

“Designing electronic systems, perhaps, and mechanical things. We’re very fond of our men and like them to be able to fulfil their interests too. They have many opportunities.”

“What about the eunuchs? That’s new to me, apart from Italian opera singers.”

“Many young men choose that way of life. They can enjoy more freedom and job opportunities. Since it’s not usual in your time I prefer not to discuss it.”

“Are whole men regarded as dangerous here? At this time I mean.” She didn’t actually nod, but I could see affirmation in her face before she quickly looked down, refusing to answer. She distracted me my asking if I was hungry yet, and told me it was time to eat.

Zandra led me to a cafeteria. There were not many people there, I think we were late. People were nudging each other and trying not to stare. I ignored them all, feeling suddenly hungry, I was keen to try something new. The food was exhibited very attractively. I didn’t see any stew, it was mostly buffet type light food. I took a dish and put a little bit of everything unfamiliar on it, ignoring the vegetables that I recognised cut like matchsticks. We went to sit with a couple of the women I’d met initially, they smiled but did not speak. We all concentrated on eating. The food tasted interesting, each piece flavoured distinctly, and there was a variety of textures, but nothing really chewy and no meat as I recognised it in my choices. I looked around and said “This is lovely!” The women smiled indulgently but said nothing. Then I realised they did not mix eating with speaking as we often do.

Walking back towards the Time control centre the women were chatting animatedly. I could barely understand them, just odd words and the mood. They were speaking quite like Americans, but faster, and I think they used lots of words we don’t have, yet. Some must have been technical, but I suspect not all. I guessed they were discussing their next step in getting me home, and perhaps what to about their guy.

After the meal we returned to the lounge by the time travel control centre. There some of that earlier conversation was relayed slowly to me. Zandra explained

that returning me to my own time was as safe as my first time journey was, not completely safe. The team had been completing checks on the system and attempting to fine tune the time of my return. I wasn't given any options, but since I had come uninvited that was fair. If I was choosing I would have stayed as long as I could, what I could learn! I'm not the sort of person who could have taken advantage of knowledge by bringing to market some great invention before its time.

They were a bit concerned about their operative in my time and place. Their very first time traveller. I got the feeling they wanted him back for scientific reasons more than any care for him I felt. Then I assured that everything was as safe as the last time, and I was led into the lift thingy, that was their time machine.

Then I suffered a really weird dislocation. I was back on Fedw Fawr with the eunuch, and asking him, "How do you keep the wormhole stable and open, and how are you not spaghettified? And will you come back, I would like to see you again, we could be friends?"

"I won't be honoured with another opportunity once the safety of the experiment is confirmed. The next time traveller will be a properly qualified researcher, a woman of course, and probably not to this time, but at this place. I cannot answer your technical questions, for I am only an assistant in the work. Please, the time is now."

I still hesitated, tempted by the future. I wondered whether he would try to physically move me. He did not look well muscled, but it was hard to tell through his loose overalls. He was taller than me. I took his hand in mine and looked into his worried eyes, aware that this was probably the greatest opportunity of my life, and the most extraordinary experience. I said more sincerely than I have ever said such words before, "I am very glad to have met you." I could feel a thrumming around us and I stood back, he quickly leapt onto the locus, and smiled gratefully. Hastily I asked "Don't you miss love?"

He looked down and blushed and said smiling "We have . . ." and in a peculiar shimmering, like the wobbling you see in the summer heat sometimes, he was gone. Jess sniffed at where he had stood, and around the spot, she looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"He just moved in time, not space. You wouldn't understand." I stroked her head.

REPORTS FROM EARTH BY AGENT MOOL

These letters or reports were found on the internet, but were not published for general reading. They ended in early 21st century, by the counting of the “Western” civilisation of Earth. The writer is as yet unknown, and must have had a good technological knowledge, or help, to cover her tracks so well. We were unable to ascertain whether they are fictional or genuine, but they do have a ring of truth.

REPORT 1

I am reporting that I have realised a little about my origin beyond Earth.

This information explains many things I did not previously understand, but also raises new questions in my mind. I always thought I was as human as the next woman, now I'm all in doubts. I imagine that things will fall into place in time, but at present I'm swinging from feeling human to alien.

I have lived a long time here completely embedded, unaware that my “soul” comes from elsewhere. The implications are quite astounding to me, I don't know how many of us there are here, or where we come from. What is the true nature of the soul of human that evolved entirely on Earth? How different are we?

I very much appreciate being put in touch with the Transformation Team. Thank you. I suppose they are here to answer my questions, and that I am to take my place among them.

I will send a few reports to show what I have understood so far, as I piece my new understanding together. I don't know how you receive them, but I assume you do. It helps me to write it down, as sometimes I still feel I'm hallucinating a bizarre science fiction scenario! No wonder I've always enjoyed SF!

REPORT 2 from Agent Mool, LIFE ON A TIDAL PLANET

“United Kingdom” (maritime island nation in northern hemisphere.)

I hope this report shows that I am beginning to grasp the nature of the planet and its problems.

This is an unpredictable planet of extremes. Sometimes its tidal nature seems too much to me, especially when there are floods, or an earthquake shatters a part of it, killing thousands of people. Yet it was the tidal forces that produced life so early on Earth. The tides are when the water rises and falls because of the pull of the Moon, which is a satellite which orbits with it, forming a double planet system. The Moon pulls a double bulge of sea around the planet causing oceans to rise and fall at the edges or shores approximately twice a day. Life started in the water oceans, and at these fluctuant edges sea life was able to adapt to life on dry land. And it is on dry land that the human tool users evolved. A planet on which life originated and developed to sentience is a very special and rare place. Earth's ever-changing,

swirling cycles give its inhabitants the interesting direct sense of time passing, by the sequence of the moon and tides, and perhaps most of all the seasons which are due to its tilted axis. It has days and nights as well, as most planets with life do.

Earth's tilted axis creates annual seasons everywhere but at the equator. Both poles are cold and the equator is hot. But when it is warmer in the northern hemisphere (summer) it is colder in the southern hemisphere, and vice versa. More of the Land is in the north of the planet, here is a greater population. They sow crops in the spring and harvest them in the autumn. Many plants die or become dormant in the colder period, so animals have less food. It gives the natives a very clear sense of the passing of time and of death. This time sense also brings poignancy to life on Earth, as the locals call it. Strangely, although most people evolved here, they are so afraid of death that even their religious rituals and teachings fail to help them accept it altogether. (More on religion next time, I'm still looking into it.) Although they research and discuss the coming changes of climate and sea level endlessly, they appear unable to enact an appropriate response.

These cycles (the tidal and the seasonal) gave rise to the idea of progress and improvement, which have created the extraordinary form of logical sentience mankind possesses. Yet they also give the people this strange sense of dissatisfaction and fear of the future. The sense of continual change provides its beautiful and inimitable character that attracts so many to incarnate here, yet so many of the people often fear change. Those that have stimulated progress seem to be those who not only welcome but aspire to change. These people will be of critical value in the near future.

I believe one of the little things that must have attracted me to Earth, and to this time in its evolution, was the wonder of the furry coated domestic mammals. I still love them, but it's not all easy here. The tides that pull at the body chemistry of a woman, at the shore, and the Earth's crust, rule so much of the life here. Sometimes I feel this very stimulating changing environment also creates fearful victims of the planet.

I was sent here for this wonderful experience, many ask but few are chosen, I should think myself lucky. Indeed I'm sure my own soul's progress has been enhanced tremendously, and perhaps that was the reason for my selection. Many come here for this hard experience; those selected (as in my own case) are often the lazy ones, who cannot take advantage of a life of ease for their progress. They are forced to try and come to terms with the vagaries of change and the peculiarities of the double gender system of reproduction.

I find it very hard and sometimes yearn for a still, lifeless place, carefully organised for the needs and comfort of the sentient life form.

REPORT 3 From Agent Mool

*My induction was probably thorough, but direct experience has shocked me.
I've been considering what we can do to help in the imminent Transition*

I'm not holiday, I have a job here. I have been greatly stimulated and even enjoyed getting to know the planet Earth. I am beginning to understand the real nature of the work I must do here – thanks to contact with the Transformation Team.

It is to awaken the People to the idea that they are not alone in the universe, and that responsibility is theirs, because they are the sentient and dominant species.

Their astronomers and physicists have provided a grand vision of the universe, they know full well that their sun is only one of a myriad, and that planets are commonplace, yet they are very wary of the idea that there must also be plenty of other sentient life forms. They are happy to play with it in stories and myths, but few appear to take the very obvious concept seriously. They mostly really believe it doesn't affect them!

Now that they have widespread nuclear weapons, and could destroy themselves, we have to help them to start to take responsibility for their home world. The People have rather overrun their world, and most of the other life forms which provide the ecological system, on which they depend, are under threat of extinction. They have very recently come to understand that the climate in which they reached dominance in is changing rapidly. Their complacency is unbelievable in view of their massive knowledge of life on earth. They know all about the history of the earth, about evolution, mass extinctions of the past, the completely different sorts of ecosystems which have existed, yet they can't really grasp that it could change, least of all that they are changing it themselves, as they are – as much by their sheer numbers as by their technology.

You can see that I find them terribly frustrating in their refusal to face obvious truths, when they know so much. But, to forgive them, I put it down to the limitations of logical thinking.

There is a cultural divide between “arts” and “science”. The Arts, one of the things that gives this race such charm, subtlety and interest to us, are how they express the beauty, the mystery, the opposing forces, infinite, ineffable, what is not understood with logic. These artistically creative people are culturally separate from those that are dominated by logic, who study science and mathematics, develop and implement engineering, technology and warfare. In recent years this difference may be accelerating, though I'm not certain of this yet. We need to help bridge the divide where we can.

The variety of cultures on earth is another extraordinary factor to understand. At this stage I don't. Although humans are all one race, they can have wildly different physical appearance, lifestyles and beliefs. Understand that they have hundreds of languages, and you will realise the extent of the human problem. At this time the variation is reducing, there are a few dominant languages, and a global identity is emerging. This is because communication around the planet has jumped to a new level through electronic communication; they call it the Internet, or World Wide Web.

This new racial linking is why we have such a special role to play at this time.

To summarise my current ideas and Plan:

Research the biggest religions, to see if any one may be more fruitful ground to sow our seeds of change into.

Target individual people who stimulate change, and who have wide influence.

Use the world wide web. I cannot trust myself not to “put my foot in it” (as we like to say for making a bad mistake) in more direct contact.

My feeling is they must reassess their sense of superiority.

Coming out publicly from systems other than Earth would force them into this. Although there has been plenty of contact, something more formal is required now, carefully planned, step by step but soon, please.

REPORT 4 from Agent Mool UK

The work on religions I did was “a blind alley”, as they say here, meaning I'm not sure that understanding religion systems helps the mission much. The well established ones all have a fixed belief system, which is difficult to change more than very slowly and incrementally. We don't have time for that. I have found a glimmer of hope in religion however:

In the past a new Prophet (one who starts a new religion) has brought about a new era of outlook, morals and thought within a racial grouping, often with great benefits, but the religions then usually become stuck in what was relevant at the time of that Prophet. That being the case, a new Prophet, from among our ranks could perhaps save the world. Indeed there are a number of prophecies from earlier Prophets, some even specifying this time, of this as a probable renaissance, rebirth. This might work, especially if the World Wide Web is the platform.

Alternatively a world war could help. They say that they have had two world wars, but fortunately they did not actually affect the whole world. The most influential world group of People is planning a world war using nuclear weapons and diseases.

The advantages: decimating the population, destroying the technological infrastructure, changing the food production systems, providing a greater sense of purpose and unity amongst those left.

The disadvantages: emotional and physical pain, loss of accumulated knowledge, wisdom, technology, and security. The People have a great need especially for emotional security. The insecure can be unpredictable and dangerous.

REPORT 5 from Agent Mool UK

I am very happy to report that I have at last made contact with other Agents. Subjectively it's a long time I've been working alone.

I now understand the fairytale battle between good and evil in more realistic terms. First I didn't believe it to be real, then I saw it as ghastly and threatening and backed right off. Now I see that the recognition of polarity enables us to bring the poles together with love. Or unite the poles by distance from them.

I've become aware of my life project, which I enjoy with great pleasure, building always for my love and interest in the ecology of Earth. (was this Seeded in me before I came?) I started this project way back in 1971, though in my ignorance I have wavered. Where I now live (thank you so much, whoever led me here!) I started planting trees more than 25 years ago (1988 I think). I'm now working on a new Forest Garden / Permaculture project here, and encouraging others with theirs.

Over the decades I have attempted to join with others in cooperative groups to encourage and develop this work. I was not a good group worker however. Currently I find working with individuals as friends is best for me and them. I have travelled enough to see how different systems of farming and food production can work. This has reinforced my predetermined faith in the concept of creating ecosystems for People. This work gives me stability in the rush of knowledge directed at me from the Transformation Team. Loving and caring they are of course, that is their job, and I am allowed to take the detailed information about world politics at my own pace.

Because I find it shocking (I realise I've cushioned myself against the difficulties People suffer) I find I am loath to pass on this information, as the Team

exhort me to do.

REPORT 6

I've been delighted to discover that the times at which I have followed my desires and dreams (often feeling selfish) are actually the times I've been following the plan I was pre-programmed with before I came! What a wonderful system!

I observe that "good luck" follows the implementation of pre-programmed desires. And I see that one's true work feels easy to do. Is this only for embedded beings like myself, or is it the case for true earthly people as well?

I cannot help but look back over the Earth lifetime I have experienced in the light my new knowledge. It is incomplete of course, and I have many questions I will try to withhold, as you are likely to suggest I should ask within, or work out the answers myself. I am now aware I am not just here to help, but to also experience the rich complexity of the situation for my own growth process.

I observed that I wavered from the job I was given at my Earth Birth, (to develop People centred harmless ecosystems), but then realised I was actually building more life experience and contacts, to keep the Project in an ever growing perspective. Is this true? Now that my perspective has widened and grown recently, I expect to find working directly and knowingly with the Team easier too.

REPORT 7

I have spent most of life here in ignorance, always trying to understand what is going on. I have worked on finding the ways the opposites are linked. Like Arts and Science, cultures north and south, east and west. I feel the dominance of the "west" has been unfortunate in many ways. My Human nature has often given me a sour view, while my Soul view allows me deep pleasure and love for all I see. I am frustrated that I had endure that dichotomy for so long. Why didn't someone tell me?? I might have been more useful, and less lackadaisical.

There is much to be hopeful about I know, I hope most sincerely the world war I mentioned in Report 4 is not necessary. I don't know if I could bear that. I sincerely believe that direct and unequivocal Contact between spacefaring races and humanity would help immensely. Can you reassure me this will happen soon?

REPORT 8

I am so relieved and pleased to at last be in touch with other conscious, knowing Agents. Working alone was beginning to tell on me, as always, whoever it is I write to, who keeps an eye on me occasionally, knew that and came to my aid. Thank you! One told me I can stay and live through the transition if I want to. In fact he assured me I could, and should stay, as I would be able to offer support. I leave that decision to others who see a greater view than I do.

I find it interesting that it did not occur to me to contact you like this before the internet was set up. And interesting that I joined the internet early on, although I was a never a natural techie. However the real Agent to Agent meetings are on another level. I fear many of the dream messages were lost to conscious memory, but more and more often I just "know" what I need to know

REPORT 9

Did I ask for recall? I didn't intend to, or do you imply the cataclysm or world war is imminent, and I won't be able to handle it? I have many more trees to plant before I leave. Most of them produce nuts and fruit, the rest are for firewood and to maintain the local ecology.

Final Report:

I quite understand my recall, and am greatly relieved. My physical age and increasing apathy surely mean I'm not ideal to be a bridge to the future. I would definitely find the cataclysm hard to bear. I hope that the little work I have done will make the transition a little smoother.

Regretfully I got nowhere in the Job I described in my 3rd Report, alerting People to the close contact Earth has with other humanoids. I am aware many People here are working very effectively in that sphere, mainly using the Internet.

I am forever grateful for this extraordinarily stimulating experience.

AGENT MOOL, United Kingdom, Europe, Earth.

EVE AND ADAM

Long, long ago, in the north of the land we now call Africa was a valley. The valley was new and slowly, fitfully, but surely growing. Later it was called Eden, and later still, the African Rift Valley. At the time I am telling of, it was Home.

In it lived a wide variety of plants and animals. Among the animals were some charming upright apes. One fine day one of these primates was out looking for food by herself, which was an unusual thing for any of these creatures to do as they were fond of company. She came across a lovely tree loaded with large and appetising fruit. She was about to pluck one when a large snake reared up in front of her. Startled, naturally she stepped back, but the attraction of the fruit prevented her from running away as she normally would have done in the face of such a threat.

Eve stood her ground and wondered at herself. She had never done such a thing before. With her eyes fixed upon the snake she weighed up her desire for fruit with her fear of the snake. She had overcome her instinct to leave the place in the middle of the valley to go to the rocky edge of the valley, where the figs grew. Relaxed by her stillness the snake coiled itself up again, it ceased to threaten her. Quietly she moved around it and took a big juicy fig. She moved away and sat at the foot of another large and beautiful tree to quiet her pounding heart and enjoy her booty.

The fig was delicious. She wondered why her friends had never eaten of this tree before. She pictured how pleased her favourite male would be to eat one. Thinking of his delight and pleasure in her gift she thought of how he might want to make love to her. Sexual feelings aroused her body at the thought of his response. She ignored her feelings. She had Ideas.

She had overcome her fear, might it be possible to overcome the instinct of her body when she met Adam? She adored him and the sight of his erect phallus would make him irresistible. She could only deny her desire for him if she could not see it. She supposed he would be same. If he could not see the place where she felt her desire so strongly perhaps he would not want her so much either. She found a large leaf and tucked its stem into the fur above her crotch, looked down at it and laughed with delight at her extraordinary idea. She plucked another leaf and went off to find Adam to tell him of her discoveries.

Adam was in a tree, repairing his bed. When he saw her fig leaf he asked "What's that?"

"Come down," she replied, "I have one for you!" and she tucked the other leaf in to cover his great appeal. "Come with me, I have something else to show you, and I'll tell you what I've been thinking."

"Thinking, what's that?" he asked, perplexed. But he followed her, fascinated. As they came close to the fig tree she pointed at it, smiling and said "Look, those fruit are wonderful!"

Adam said, "Eve, don't, a great vicious snake lives there, we never go near that tree."

"Oh, it's OK, just be quiet and move slowly, I've had a fig, it was delicious and it got me thinking. You must have one too." The snake was still asleep in the shade and Eve crept round to other side of the tree and took two more figs. She led him to her tree of knowledge and gestured him to sit down with her to enjoy his fruit.

They ate with pleasure and then he asked her “So what’s with the fig leaves and this thinking thing?” Eve explained about how she had overcome her instinct to retreat in the face of the threatening snake and then told him how she had thought about overcoming sexual instincts. He didn’t understand, but looked at her fig leaf with new interest, and thought about what lay beneath it. He gently removed it from her nest of hair and smelled her desire. They made love with a strange new intensity they had never felt before.

Afterwards they did not want to draw away from one another, they chuckled into each other’s fur. They felt different and knew that they had experienced things the rest of the troupe never had. They gazed into each other’s eyes in wonder. Then he said “That was different, it can’t be right.”

“Do you feel good or don’t you?”

“Wonderful, never felt better!”

“Then it must be right!”

Then he asked Eve “What’s Thinking?”

“I think,” she paused and giggled, “it’s what I do when I overcome my natural instinct. I have to stop myself doing what I normally would, and look at myself doing it, as if I was someone else.”

“What? Who else, me?”

“Not you silly! I shall call her God. This tree I shall call the Tree of Knowledge. Knowledge is what comes from Thinking. That fig tree is the Tree of Life because it can feed us. Shall we go and tell the others?”

They discussed Knowledge at length with the other upright apes. Most of them saw it as a bad thing because it was new. They believed the fig leaves were really stupid, and that the Tree of Life belonged to the snake and was forbidden. They started to believe that Adam and Eve were a very bad influence and stopped listening to their nonsense about Knowledge and Thinking.

With their new understanding Eve and Adam began to think that there might be other interesting places with new fruit trees that they had never seen. As the others had stopped sharing food with them and turned away when they approached they decided they had little to lose and much to gain by leaving. With a new confidence in themselves, they set off north, with their fig leaves in place.

For just the two of them to survive alone was a great challenge. They met it by thinking. Eve used leaves and stems to weave a basket so they could carry fruit along with them. Adam hit a rock a few times and produced a knife to hack meat from a dead deer they found. And so they wandered on into unknown lands. Their children learnt thinking even while they were young and it was one of them who overcame his fear of fire. Instead of climbing up to sleep as soon as it got dark they used a fire to frighten away the predators. They would sit around their fire and Adam would carry on making tools while Eve told stories which made them all think even more.

INTO THE MISTY MOUNTAINS

Gwen was on the geriatric ward checking over the drugs list, when the ward Sister came in to ask to her talk to a woman. The woman's father had been taken down for x-rays and his daughter was rather upset about it and wanted to see the doctor. Gwen got out his file for the first time as he had only recently been admitted. He had a very weak heart and his blood pressure had now been stabilised. Gwen had been impressed by his cheerfulness, although she could see he didn't much like being unable to get out of bed. The woman followed her into the little office looking rather distressed. Gwen took charge of the situation and started to explain his condition and the treatment he was receiving. The woman interrupted her saying "But he's dying isn't he? Can't you stop messing about with him and just keep him comfortable?" Gwen pictured the old man in his bed, his laughing eyes had showed an inner strength, and showed no fear. She could not see that he was dying, but then his daughter had been watching changes in him day by day, she seemed to know. The woman was watching Gwen's face and added, "Look, dying is alright you know, we all have to die. He can handle it, I can handle it, why can't you handle it? He just wants a bit of peace."

Gwen replied "We are giving him active treatment, but I will discuss this with his consultant." She wondered again why medical staff refused so stubbornly to accept death. She did not think the doctor in charge of this case would be much help. "You may well be right, we will do our best to respect his dignity." Their eyes met and she recognised a look of understanding in her tear-shining eyes. The woman left, thanking her.

Gwen sat at the cluttered desk thinking back to her recent holiday in Wales. She had gone alone to seek her roots. She had finished her medical training at university and was now embarking on her first job at Guys Hospital as a Houseman. Although she was born in London her parents were Welsh and her childhood memories of the tales her mother had told her had left her with a romantic idea of her heritage. She particularly liked a fairy story of great antiquity that related to her family, they came from a village called Myddfai in the Black Mountains.

In the fairy kingdom under the little tarn known as Llyn y Fan Fach there lived a beautiful maiden. She had great healing skills and a deep compassion for mankind. A neighbouring farmer had very naturally fallen deeply in love with her. She knew she could give her skills to this man without them being abused or lost. By marrying him the world of men could be enriched and she longed to be able to find fulfilment in this way. Her father was suspicious of people and feared their avarice and cruelty would corrupt his lovely daughter. He could not keep her from her happiness however and let her go, giving as a dowry a herd of wonderful white cattle. He made one condition to the marriage: if her husband were to hit her three times with iron, she was to return to the fairy kingdom, and he would lose her forever.

For many years they lived very happily. The cattle were always healthy and productive and the farm thrived. They had several strong children and the Lady of the Lake taught her husband and her children each a large portion of her knowledge of herbs, healing and health. For miles around their skill was acknowledged and sought after. Marriages go as marriages go, and though they were envied for their contentment, human weakness shows itself everywhere. After many years it

happened that the man hit his wife with iron for the third time. Once he had flung a horseshoe in her direction in a temper, when the horse he was shoeing kicked him. Once he had shouted at her and so distressed her that she tripped over an iron pot, and the last time he had let an iron gate hit her. It was with great sadness that she called her herd of lovely cattle to follow her back to the lake, leaving her earthly family behind. Without the cattle to support the family they concentrated on medicine. They treasured her memory by using the skills she had taught them. They helped many people and passed on the knowledge so it would not be lost to the world.

It was probably this story that gave Gwen her determination to follow many of her relatives and become a doctor. The ancient skills of her family might now be lost, but perhaps there was still some genetic predisposition to healing that she could draw on. Or perhaps she felt she must continue to atone for the wrong done to her fairy ancestress.

The first destination of her Welsh holiday had been Myddfai and the Black Mountains. She found Llyn y Fan Fach and gazed at the lake, trying to imagine the events of the tale, she spoke to one or two people, but she felt a stranger there, as of course she was. She was not sure what it was that she had hoped to find, but she felt disappointed. She drove about Wales taking with her a feeling of sadness and loss, though what she had lost she could not say. She was confident about being a doctor except in one area, and that was death. Her training had assumed death as the Enemy that a doctor had to fight and subdue. She could not quite understand that attitude since everyone has to die once they have been born.

She had worked so hard for so long that she had almost forgotten what relaxation was like. She cleared her mind and opened it up to the magnificent beauty of the country about her. The weather was fine and comfortable, at the top of the hill she saw that the mountains were covered with heavy cloud. Gwen decided to walk in these mysterious misty mountains. From a distance they looked magical enough, but as she made the final ascent to the highest pass she quickly found herself surrounded by confusing sense effects. The path was uphill, then came to a downhill stretch, but yet she still had to make the effort of a hard climb. Was she going uphill or downhill? She could not be sure. The pass climbed a steep sided valley, the other side was close by, a stone's throw away, but the lonely farmhouse she could see looked like a tiny toy miles away. The sheep were little white dots though their voices sounded loud and plaintive under the clouds as if they were right by her.

The tops of the mountains were entirely hidden by cloud, indeed she was entering the cloud herself and felt the damp of it soaking into her. She was following a path but had not consulted a map, and so was not sure if it was a proper footpath or just a sheep track. It started as bare earth, but became rockier as she ascended. Looking around, the hill slopes below looked like dull green velvet draped over the rock beneath, with the mauve of the heather sparkled with golden gorse and brighter green woven in like a tapestry. Nearer the track, the mossy growth between the rocks was shining like emeralds with a green richer than the imagination can hold. It looked strange and unfamiliar, she touched it tentatively with her hand.

The craggy mountains around seemed to be a charming playground for having fun in. She climbed up stepped bluffs and slid down crashing screes. A grey faced ewe watched indulgently, when the whistled notes of a folk tune drifted across the mountains. It fitted perfectly as background music to the pastoral scene about her. It demanded her attention and she thought at first that it must be by a classical

composer, but no, it was nothing she had heard before. It was all music that is heavenly, reminiscent of the peak of creativity in a composer's work. She looked about for the musician who was getting closer. There was no other sound, she thought she should hear the sound of tumbling stones under the feet of anyone moving across this rocky terrain. She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. A small figure was nimbly trotting down a scree slope without moving a stone. She would have mistaken him for a sheep but for his upright posture. His clothes seemed to be the colour of the mountain, so only his music and his movement made him clear to behold. He seemed to be picking a route apparently randomly, as if he did not mind where he went, but Gwen felt he was coming towards her. It was only when he was close enough to smile at her that she could see what he looked like.

The Whistler was small and neat of figure. His face was narrow and pointed, haloed by golden curls. His eyes had a curious shiny brightness. The tune stopped when he smiled. Gwen thought perhaps she should say something, but had no idea what, and it seemed nothing was required. The Whistler summoned her to accompany him by a gesture of his head, and then ignored her as she followed. From his lips the music resumed, but this time instead of seeming to fit in perfectly with the environment it was a tune of tragedy and the tears were streaming down Gwen's cheeks as she listened. It expressed all loss and loneliness that may be known, the burden of all the suffering, the anger the pain and the grief of the world was in that evasive melody. She was forced to feel all that grief there and then as she followed the footsteps of the Whistler. She had no thoughts of her own left, nor did she know where they were bound, nor did she care. It ended when they arrived at a stone built cottage blending so well with the natural landscape that she had not noticed it. The Whistler turned to face Gwen and smiled again. She had thought that the grief expressed in the tune was the Whistler's, but then she realised it was her own. His smile washed away all the pain and she was whole and light hearted for the first time in she forgot how many years. Without knocking he opened the door for Gwen to enter. The room was warm, dimly lit and rather smoky. Stooped over a stove in the chimney was an old woman stirring a pot. She turned to Gwen and she noticed the same bright eyes that seemed to know her.

"You have come a long way" she said quietly "You may rest here." Gwen sat on a settle in the gloom of the cottage. The Whistler had not followed her in and she felt a pang of loss for a moment. The woman noticed it on Gwen's face and admonished her with a gentle clucking sound as she handed her a bowl of broth. The pulpy mess of vegetables flavoured with mountain herbs revived her spirits rapidly and when she had finished it and licked the spoon, she wondered what was in it that made her feel so good. She looked up and the old woman was watching her expectantly.

"Thank you, Kind Lady, that was just what I needed, will you tell me what makes it so rich and strength-giving?" The old woman smiled and reached up to the low rafters where bundles of herbs were hanging. She showed her common yarrow, meadowsweet and sweet marjoram, both were just coming into flower. "These are very good, young woman, the roots of the yarrow go far into the ground to bring up things that a weary body lacks, the meadowsweet keeps your blood flowing well, the sweet delicacy of the marjoram cheers the heart, the potatoes and carrots give you strength and milk enriches it all. It is a simple recipe and a good one." She took away the bowl and busied herself around the fire, humming to herself. Gwen found her eyes closing.

"Are you ready to return? You know the way now." Gwen was startled out of a dream she instantly forgot. She realised she did not know the way, nor remember even if it was uphill or downhill. She wanted the wise-woman to give her all her wisdom of mortality but did not know how to ask. "Just follow the path downhill. Death is about the end of life, young woman. You must understand life to understand death and that usually takes a lifetime. The essence of life is eternal, and is not restricted to earthly time. Your time often seems like a restriction but it gives life order, you will need that for all your life. If you learn to give love completely whenever you can and to live fully in your allotted time, you will have used your life wisely. Then you will be ready for the next stage when it comes." She smiled, turned away and went about her business as if Gwen had ceased to exist. So she went out of the open door into the sunlight and saw the path winding its way down the mountainside. It did not seem at all familiar but it was easy to follow.

For the rest of her holiday Gwen was in a kind of daze. She sometimes found herself weeping at the beauty of the mountains, or smiling at the sheep as if they were old friends, and she wondered what was the matter with her. She knew that something slightly extraordinary had happened to her, but she could not quite remember what. She thought she remembered hearing some magically beautiful music that had affected her very deeply although she could usually recall a tune easily, that music left no trace of a memory, apart perhaps for a strange feeling of sad happiness. She knew an old lady had given her some soup. It was very commonplace for a dish that had seemed like ambrosia for the gods as she ate it, but she determined to try and make it like the old lady had. She believed she had been told the answers to things she desperately wanted to understand, but the words completely escaped her.

On her return to London she did try the recipe, again and again to the amusement of her friends, but lacking the fresh wild herbs she could not perfect it. She read lots of books on herbalism and argued its merits often. When the time came, Gwen felt ready to start work at Guy's, although she was nervous. She fell straight into the hospital duty rota and hardly had time to think about what she was doing, until that daughter of a new patient challenged her.

Gwen came back to reality and shuffled the old man's file back together. She thought she now had a fight on her hands, both with the consultant and with the ward Sister who looked on all the ward patients as her property. She found an unexpected reserve of confidence when she did speak to the consultant. He seemed quite convinced by her argument and said "It's a pity more relatives are not like that, you know, we ought to listen more to them. After all, his daughter knows far more about him than our instruments can ever tell us. We will try to keep him as comfortable as we can."

Gwen said "I am so relieved to hear you say that. I didn't want to see that lovely old man deprived of all his dignity."

"Have you thought of working in the Hospice Movement? I think it might suit you when you've got a bit more experience."

"Well, yes, I have. But there is death in all hospitals, why shouldn't it always be dignified? I'd like to see all doctors and nurses understanding it as a necessary end that should be more openly discussed with patients and their relatives."

"You've got a good point there, Dr Williams, but don't forget how many people are terrified of death. You'd be surprised how few are ready for it, however inevitable and obvious it is."

It was less than a week after Gwen's meeting with his daughter that the old man died. She was so glad to be able to sit by him, keeping the fussing nurses away and holding his hand. His blue eyes had met hers and she had felt a communion with him before they closed and his breath rasped a few times before ceasing. Looking at his wrinkled face and the old woman in the mountains came into her mind. She closed her eyes and the understanding she had felt on her strange visit there washed through her again.

A MESOLITHIC AFTERNOON

The days were perceptibly drawing out again. This day was cold, dry and windless. Eliswen scraped away at a hare skin by the meagre light of a low fire, considering how she had coped with her first winter alone. She had assuaged her initial loneliness by trying to help the ox hunting people by the lake to the north west with her healing skills. They had a member who was good with herbs, and didn't trust her foreign herbal lore too much, but they did value her subtle healing, which always gave great peace and comfort, and had sometimes achieved cures. She had stopped going there uninvited however, because they were always trying to get her to marry some fine man.

She had got used to being by herself. She confirmed her lonely existence by managing daily life efficiently. She set and checked traps every day, twice when she wanted to be outside more. On these walks she looked carefully for signs of animals and birds, for clues to better places she could set more snares. She was not doing well for game in spite of her efforts, and had eaten no fresh meat for nearly half a moon. The meat she had salted and dried in the autumn had not lasted long; when it went off she had thrown it away. She collected dead sticks for the fire on these walks too.

Although she had lost weight, she had never felt hungry for long. She kept a big pot of broth going, made of dried herbs, fungi and seeds. When she could get meat she roasted it first then added the bones and offal to the broth. Indoors she had made several rough baskets and had tried improving her trap design. She made and repaired snares, and spent a lot of time working leather. She didn't have a special use for this hare skin, so she was leaving the fur on it, it was the thick winter pelt. It would always come in handy for wrapping something up in.

Across her reverie she thought heard voices, she stopped scraping at the hide to listen. She guessed someone needed healing and hoped she would not be called away on a visit. Although she enjoyed being fed when she went away, now that she was feeling satisfaction in her solitary independence she did not want it interrupted. It was the inevitable socialising, underlain by the assumption that it was not appropriate for her to live alone that got to her. She got tired of fending off the suggestive allusions to sexual opportunities. She hoped her visitors were bringing meat, and then chided herself for the selfish thought. She went to the doorway to see who was coming, trying to prepare herself to meet people cordially, yet uneffusively.

It was a quiet windless day and the voices carried easily, the two figures she noticed were just coming down from brow of the hill to the west. By their walk they looked like young men, neither looked sick and her heart sank at the prospect of having to go with them on a healing visit, she would try to work out what was needed, and send it with them. She went back in quickly and put three hot stones in the broth to heat it up and added birch twigs to the fire, then she bundled up the skin she was working on and poked into the roof to make more room.

When the men sounded close by she went out again and stood by the opening. They stopped, smiling and nodding greeting. She did not recognise them. The older man looked full of confidence but was deferential towards her. The other was just a boy, though full grown, he was thin, pale and drawn, but not ill. He appeared to be one of those whom winter is hard on, he looked down a lot. She could tell from their deferential demeanour that their society was the hierarchical sort, with plenty of rules.

The older one said, "We hope we find you well. We thought you might like some winter meat." He held out a small leaf wrapped package. "Thank you, I would, I am well, but I haven't any meat, so I am most grateful. I have some broth for you, come in." They pushed through the skins after her and sat on the floor facing the fire. She stirred the broth and added another hot stone. She unwrapped the little parcel expectantly, the meat looked dark and well preserved, she put a piece in the broth, and smiled at the men appreciatively saying "Very good." Keeping another bit to chew, she carefully rewrapped the rest and tucked it into the roof near the fire. The meat was very salty, but not too strong. She was not fond of the high flavours that often developed in the preserving process. She checked the broth again, it was steaming, she got the ladle down and filled two bowls, and sipped some from the ladle herself. She noticed that the salt in the meat had already improved the flavour. The men slurped hungrily at the green mess, they didn't seem to mind that it had little taste of meat in it. As she watched them she could see they were finding the winter has hard and hungry as she was. She tried to guess where they had come from. They spoke differently from the people at Bodwrog, and from those at Orme Hill.

Eventually, when they had scraped out the last grains in their bowls the older one said, "We heard you are a good healer, worth finding." So she had not met them before, and they had come specially, she was pleased she had a reputation that was spreading. "Some say that," she answered, "but you look well yourselves. Where have you travelled from?"

They laughed a little and looked at each other. Then the older one said "The Fair Land" she looked puzzled, "we use the plain to the between of the mountains and the sea." He wanted to say what they had come for, so she kept quiet. "It's the Grandmother. Anyone else of her age we wouldn't trouble you about, but we can't bear to see her looking so poorly. She has cared for us all, she's everyone's Mother, and without her, we wouldn't know what to do, would we?" The lad still didn't speak, but thinking of the Grandmother clearly made him sad. Eliswen thought the best she could do would be to give them her general winter tonic herb mix. She asked carefully for all the symptoms though, to be sure herself, and to give them confidence in her. She was coughing badly it seemed, and fading with age, she guessed that she was much loved, and felt their fear of her death. She thought rapidly. Unless the weather changed quickly or she was exceptionally strong, she was likely to die soon. She didn't like cases like this, a much valued person dying after taking her herbs was bad for a reputation. She tried to find the right words that would not bring offence or upset. "Your Grandmother must have worked long and hard to have won so much love from her family, she must be very tired now. I think she has many loved ones on the other side she looks forward to seeing again. Isn't she very tired of life?"

The young man became agitated at these words, she had clearly made her point. "She would miss us terribly, we need her. Will you come and help her, please?"

There must be some other problem to cause such distress. Perhaps they were concerned about who would take her place once she was gone. The community might be split by her death, or perhaps the next in line was not popular. Eliswen decided this was the real problem, but had to get more information to be able to help at all. She asked "Did she ask you to fetch me?"

"The Chief told us to, we are all most anxious she is saved." Said the older man.

"If the Grandmother herself has not asked for my help, then that must be respected. Her wisdom is great is it not?"

"Oh yes, we all respect her wisdom above all others, that is why we need her so."

"I quite understand your feelings, but are you really being fair to her? You will all have to face her death one day won't you? Will it be harder sooner than later?" They watched the fire, pondering her questions.

"We are not ready for it now, perhaps never, but things may change . . ." She had to push this, "Who will take her place?"

"Ah, that is the question, you see the Chief's wife is, well, she's a good mother, but she's got a poor memory, we all feel a good memory is necessary. Our Grandmother knows so much, her memory reaches back to before before. That is why we always trust her judgements, because she knows so much."

Eliswen felt there had to be someone in their community that could take the place of this dying Grandmother. They needed more confidence in the candidate, reassurance would help them, she decided to take a risk. She rummaged in the roof and brought out a small leather pack. She said, "Perhaps the stones can help." She got out nine little pebbles of different sorts, closed her eyes and shook them in her cupped hands, she muttered some words and listened for the voice in her head. Then she shook the stones again, blew on them and threw them on the floor. She studied them thoughtfully, composing her words. "The woman who has spent the most time looking after your Grandmother lately. Though she is quiet, she takes everything in. She should be the one. Would anyone object?"

"Her? She hasn't any children. She had two, but they both died very young. That would be the problem. And she's rather young to be wise."

"Sometimes the Gods grace the young with wisdom. Does she care for the other children?"

"Well of course she does, she's very good and kind, very helpful, she talks to the children more than to the rest of us."

"In this case I think you will have to make an exception to your rule of motherhood. She does have experience of childbirth after all. But have you asked the Grandmother who should replace her, her wisdom should point the way forward shouldn't it?"

"We haven't asked her, because we don't want it to come to that."

"I think she would appreciate being asked. Ask her first. The other thing you can do is to tell your Chief what I have found out from the stones about the childless woman, they say she is the one. If he doubts it he should test her memory and her wisdom."

"How would he do that?"

"First, ask her the name of the Grandmother's Grandmother."

"But she probably didn't even have one."

"The mother of the mother of the Grandmother, I mean. If she knows that, it means she has a good memory and a lot of interest in the traditions and knowledge of your family. Then, ask her what quality is the best to keep your family flourishing."

"And what should she answer?"

"If her answer is about selflessness, or love, or generosity, then she is the one. Now I will give you some herbs that will ease the Grandmother's cough." She piled as much dried winter tonic mix as she could onto the hare skin, and wrapped it

tightly, tying the feet to fasten it safely. “Make a strong tea with this, brewed well, do you have any honey? That would help her.”

“No, none left now.” Eliswen guessed the old woman might be malnourished, a grandmother would have few teeth and probably small appetite, extra energy in her medicine would brighten her. “Crush good edible roots and boil them, with some crushed grains to the brew at the beginning, to give her some energy, they are important, and will thicken her broth. Then add a handful of this herb mix, simmer it until you see colour in the broth change, let it stand to cool a little, strain it then give it to her to drink. Can you remember all that I have told you?” They looked unsure, so she went over the recipe again, this time showing them the ingredients in their proper quantities, and using gestures to indicate the time.

She reminded them to ask the Grandmother first who should succeed her. Then she gave them the questions they should ask the young woman to test her, and made sure both of them could repeat them back to her. She didn’t have room for them stay the night, or want their company. She asked if they could get home alright. The man explained they planned to stay with relatives on the way back, she was relieved.

She pushed the unburnt wood from around the fire into the middle. She added a thick piece of dead birch, and then took the stones out of the pot in the ladle, rinsing the stones into the bowl and replacing them on the edge of the fire where they would heat up again. She had to check her traps now and collect more firewood.

It was just about dark when she got back, happily with a hare, perhaps the mate of the last one she caught. A blessing on her for the help she given, for the broth was all but finished. She quickly skinned it got it ready to roast with three sticks arranged it just above the flames. While it sizzled into the fire, making an appetising smell, she sank into a satisfied reverie of gratitude.

INITIATION – EARTH, FIRE AND WATER

Richard needed to shift out of his depression, he knew that, but couldn't do it. After trying various things he answered an advertisement for a "Weekend Guaranteed to Shift Your Stuff. *Money back if not satisfied.*"

The place was beautiful, by a lake, with small mountains around. There was a white canvas tent he wasn't invited into. He breathed the clean air gratefully, thinking just hanging out in this sweet peaceful place would be enough. Three women were taking part as well.

First they were asked to trust Eleanor, the group leader. She explained they would each go through their 'process' individually. Richard was desperately stricken with a painful loss in love, he had nothing to lose. He had to agree to let her take him through a process that she promised would give him a new life.

She told him to lie in bare hole in the earth, a four foot deep grave. There were flattish but rough rocks in the bottom. It was hard and uncomfortable. She pulled a sheet of corrugated iron over the top. He wasn't frightened at first. He could see by the light that came in around the edge of the corrugated, specially on one side. She said to him "you have to stay there for as long as I say. Time will pass slowly, it will feel longer than it really is, you must stick with it and stay there. This is the hardest part and it is important." He heard a rock being dragged onto the iron lid above him. Just a little light seeped around the edge, the metal bent with the weight. There was silence for a while then he was shocked by the crash of another rock onto his roof. She shoved it a bit so that it blocked most of the light that was coming in. She shouted "stay there till I tell you!" A point on a rock was digging into his hip. He moved around it and tried to get comfortable. Then another reverberating crash indicated another rock on the corrugated. It was shoved till it shut out most of the little remaining light that crept into his tomb. His ears were open for her next shout. He listened, he cupped his hands behind his ears and turned his head. He could not hear her or anything at all. Yes, the wind in the trees he could hear. She must have gone away, or was she silently waiting nearby?

He wanted to call out, but was afraid to show weakness. There's a contradiction, or a paradox. Afraid to show fear. He wasn't frightened. He'd told her he trusted her. He shuffled again to try and get comfortable. He tried to think of this pit as a bed. No, it was too hard and rough, a resting place. Not a final one. Only for while, she'd come back soon. How soon? He had no idea, longer than he thought, or was it longer than he felt? Long but not long really. It felt long already. If he could sleep then the time, whatever that was, would pass quickly. He might as well shut his eyes, since there was nothing to see. He tried not to think what might come next. He hadn't really expected this. It was worse than being made to meditate under blanket. Then a scream, he remembered that others were nearby doing the same.

The rocks were getting unbearable, however he moved something was sticking into his body. He decided to try and move the rocks. He opened his eyes and realised it had got completely dark. Of course it would have, that meant it must be after eight, he couldn't remember what the time was when he got in here. It must be an hour by now.

He had come to terms to this strange imprisonment and apart from the physical pain was at peace. He even dozed a little. His state of painful peace was broken by stones crashing on his roof. He felt his body literally jump with fright, pain as he hit the rock again. It sounded like a handful of gravel, then came bigger stones, and a booming rock. Why was she putting more stones on? Why didn't she do that in the first place, he hadn't tried to get out. He was sure he could have if he had chosen to. Perhaps she thought he would have reached desperation by now and would to try and get out. The roof was sagging in dangerously, she was on it shoving rocks around. Then he heard her scrabbling at the smaller stones. He called "hello"

"Shut up you arsehole. Shit for brains, this isn't for fun you know" and he heard another shower of gravel on his roof "OK" he thought, she must know what she's doing, he hoped she did. He didn't reply. There was silence again, she said no more. Again he didn't know if she'd crept away or was still there. He hoped she was still there, had she been there all the time or gone away? He could cope if she had, but the darkness brought a chill into his bones, or was it because he hadn't been moving. He waved his legs about, kicking the sides of his grave, dirt fell on him. Cold damp earth, he shook himself, some got into his clothes. He wriggled to get it out, some went underneath him inside his tee shirt. Seriously uncomfortable, he could not longer understand that this could possibly be a valuable experience. Should he attempt an escape he wondered. Did anything matter? Only discomfort, which he's already tried to and failed to reduce in many ways. A new position felt better only for a short time. He had to get out!

Then Eleanor shouted "Get out of there you lazy shithead. Getting comfortable? No way!" Suddenly amid a shower of stones his roof was raised. It was dark outside but he could see as his eyes were used to the dark. "Come on up you get, NOW!" and then he was blinded by a flaming torch thrust into his face. He scrambled back and out of the side of the pit away from her. His legs weren't working right yet but stumbling he ignored that and said "Okay, okaay, take it easy, here I am."

"Good, quick march, get the blood flowing again, I've made a fire to warm up by. Come on, follow me to the lake." As they turned the corner he could see the orange glow of a little fire dancing on the water side of the hill. Then a bigger fire right by the lake came into view. The flames attracted him, he warmed his cold hands at the fire. He noticed it was dark in the middle, it was actually a ring of fire. Without a word she knocked him off balance and into the water. His foot slipped on the mud and he splashed into deep water. He was pushed under, her foot he guessed, held him under. In panic he wriggled out from the pressure and rose to the surface spluttering. He gasped at the air, she forced him under again. He wasn't out of his depth, but the bottom was slippery, so he couldn't get out as she was now pushing him under with a stick or something pokey. After his third gasp of breath at the surface she was pulling him out with a hook in the waist of his jeans.

"Now you can warm up, come on." He staggered to the fireside with a feeling of relief that the ordeals were over. Then he was shoved into the fire itself. "She's trying to kill me!" he thought as he screamed. He was enveloped in steam, he could only see a blur where she stood, all that was clear was her malicious Cheshire cat grin. He could feel the water heating up in his clothes, hear and smell his hair

burning. Before he was boiled and cooked to a turn she pulled him out again with the boathook.

He was sobbing when she led him back up the hill by the hand. With motherly kindness she sat him by the smaller cosy fire with three people huddled silently around it. She handed him a large towel saying "Get your wet things off, dry yourself and wrap this around you." She put a fleecy blanket by him. They all enjoyed a light meal and hot drinks.

"You don't need to talk or think about this until tomorrow. I'll be here if you want me to be, not if you don't. You've experienced earth, water and fire, but it isn't finished yet. Next we meditate. This'll be nice, you have to sit on stone, the quarry?"

"Can't we sit here to meditate, by the fire?" Asked one of the women.

"I don't want you too comfortable or you might go straight to sleep."

Dreamless sleep was all Richard wanted. It was easy enough to follow the group trailing along the hillside towards the quarry. When they reached it they found it in deep darkness, far too dark to look for stones to sit on.

"Sit anywhere you like, it's all the same, cold and uncomfortable. OK?" she turned away from the group and disappeared in the gloom. The four of them stood around helplessly, hugging their rugs around themselves. "Anyone got a torch?" someone asked dully. No one answered. Richard thought, and finally said, "I'm going to find somewhere to sleep." No one answered. He stumbled away from the group, then wondered what he was doing. He couldn't see, how was he going to find a place? Then he fell over a stone and saved his head and knees with his hands, which hurt so he shouted. Someone called "You OK?" he replied with a stream of all the worst swear words that came to mind, the gist of which was NO. He didn't try getting up. He felt around with his fingers and found he was on a stone scattered slope. He shoved a few out of the way, making a hollow with his feet and lay down foetally. He couldn't get comfortable of course, but he dozed, he dreamt, his body ached.

He must have slept because he awoke, aching all over and angry, resentful, furious. The others had gone. He was hungry and went find some food. He was PAYING for this after all! Emerging from the quarry to could see the little group round a small fire clutching mugs. He joined them and asked for coffee, hoping to sound polite. "Sorry, try this" said Eleanor as she passed him a mug of herb tea. He took his mug to face the lake instead of the fire, sipped it, wondering what it was, local weeds he guessed, free. He heat was welcome. He hadn't finished the drink before he smelt cooking. Suddenly he was filled with hope and happiness, at the simple thought of food. He could have started with cereal, but the smell of frying bacon was too overwhelming. They chose from an array of wonderful, simple fried breakfast things. There was also all stuffed themselves with bread they warmed on the fire and covered with butter. Everyone was smiling and cheerful.

"I am reborn, a new person. From here I can start afresh, thank you!" stated a girl, confidently.

"Next" ordered the group leader.

"I am processing, I imagine I will be for a long time." From an older woman.

"Next"

"I am lost and weak, Broken. I will have to rebuild myself from here."

"Well, that's what you needed, presumably."

“No, I wanted new strength, not more weakness.”

“So now you know what you want, good!” self satisfied.

“I think it’s not so bad that I’m tempted to make an effort to conform, to fit in safely and never be challenged again.”

“Is that what you need?”

“I didn’t think so before this, but perhaps it is.”

“That’s for you to work out. Next.” I was silent. Eleanor’s self-satisfied complacency made me angry again, seething with rage in fact. “Next!” she repeated piercing me with her glare.

“Fuck off.”

“Aha, we have anger, good, tell us, in your own time.” I was silent. A little more gentle now. “Your current anger reflects back through your life, times you’ve suppressed your anger, turned it inwards where it’s been fucking you up. How long do you think? You’re angry with me now, tell me so.” Ooh, therapy at last, he labelled her words.

He realised although he had come for help in getting out of depression, he resisted that terribly. Somewhere inside, he believed depression to be a proper response to life. He didn’t want to cooperate with this mad cow, so said nothing. His anger made him resist gratifying her with an outpouring of emotion.

“OK, no problem. Go up that scree towards the quarry. Sit on the edge looking into it. Face away from us and the lake. Stay there until someone gets you. You agreed to trust me, remember.”

That suited him well and he scrambled up and gazed all around, how beautiful to be on top of the world, away from civilisation. He could see the others pottering about the site, and turned away. He made himself comfortable with a view of the distance and some of the nearer mountains. It was soothing to the soul. The beauty and calm seemed in a moment to pierce his heart, tears streamed down his face. He asked himself why he cried so, and answered – “because I’ve never allowed my real emotion, never felt my heart open to the world around me. Ohmygod!” he thought, “I’m not going to thank the cow for this! And then I burst into laughter at his own intransigence. “What a joke I am to take myself so seriously. We all are, human-idiot-beans.” His laughter subsided towards giggling and sobbing.

The experiences the bitch had put him through actually had shaken something down in me. The least he felt he could do for his self-respect was disobey her order to wait there to be fetched. So he started down. He would walk away from the group and follow the stream perhaps. Then he could hear them scrambling and running across the scree towards him. He turned to face them. They were all smiling in welcome or something. Eleanor looked right into his eyes, he couldn’t look away, their gazes were locked as if we were lovers, trusting and understanding. Without meaning to, he embraced her, and the other three initiates all cheered. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. He was reborn. Shit! He thought – he had to face the world direct. Reborn into what?

It’s people, people that matter, they are as real in their own worlds as he was in his own, obviously. He realised that other people have their own depths of fear and uncertainty too. “I’m not unique, blast! We’re all just folk, part of humanity. It seems all rather simple and obvious now. I think this stupid initiation process might have slightly worked.

THE ANSWER TO HUMAN AGGRESSION?

A story from a dream

We had gone to bed, when there was a knock at the door. We were still awake, and had been talking quietly. We waited, wondering. Then louder more purposeful knocks. Mike muttered "I better see what's up." I heard him ask something and then open the door. Then a voice I didn't recognise, quiet but assured. Then Mike was saying "OK, yes I understand."

I was worried, what was he agreeing to with someone I didn't know? And at this time of night? Not a proper time for a visit, so it must be of some importance. Should I go down? Before I could decide I heard the voices of more people, whether they had come in together or gradually, I had no idea. Curiosity got me out of bed and into a heavy dressing gown which I tied carefully before going downstairs. Before I reached the bottom I saw a bunch of people in the hall, mostly men, in a gaggle of earnest discussion.

I didn't want to get involved straight off so nipped past the hall and through to the kitchen and filled the kettle, cups of tea all round perhaps, or one for me. I couldn't really hear what the conversation was about, but caught snatches, like emphatically, "the situation is more serious than most people realise." And "humanity is at risk." I was seriously concerned now. We knew the world was in a bad state, overpopulation, food shortages, popular uprisings in many countries, often countered without mercy. In the west we were just about coping, but robbery with violence had increased very noticeably, but so had convivial parties where friends and neighbours shared what they had, like community growing schemes at allotment plots. I had chosen to notice the increased cooperation rather than the stealing, ramraiding, and hijacking of trucks that might contain foodstuffs. I heard about those, but put out of mind. Like many people, we carried on with an abstemious and careful lifestyle, believing that care would solve it all for us. The bigger picture didn't bear thinking about because it was serious, we knew that. As we couldn't change the world ourselves, what could we do but keep on?

Had these guys got a plan? Did they need our help or what? I heard Mike's voice, slightly shrill "I don't know anything about it, it sounds crazy!" then "I'd know if she knows anything." Then I was frightened, I couldn't leave the house in my dressing gown, so forgetting about tea, I quickly crept back towards our bedroom to get dressed.

At the top of the stairs I was shocked. Coming towards me from the direction of our bedroom door were two women. The first was dressed in green medical trousers and top, more shocking was that her face was entirely hidden by a green surgical mask. She was holding a syringe like a weapon. A step behind her was a bigger woman, dressed smartly in a skirt and jacket, short fair hair. I thought my heart was stopping, I gulped convulsively. The taller woman said, attempting to be reassuring "It's alright, we only want to talk to you. Just tell us what we need to know and there won't be any trouble." I noticed I was trembling with fear. I tried to answer but could only stutter. "Why don't you come and try and relax?" the taller woman smiled falsely, indicating the open bedroom door. I glanced downstairs, betraying my idea to shout for Mike to help me. "It's OK, come on." She said shortly and grabbing my arm and pulling me into the bedroom, she shoved me roughly onto the bed.

“We have to know about the biological weapon, it’s very important.” I worked as a lab assistant in a medical genetics lab, but I didn’t know anything about weapons and tried to say so. “You know more than you think, we going to help you uncover your knowledge.” She nodded at the medical woman who shoved the hypodermic into my arm before I knew it. I was horrified, and terrified. I lay back, realising I was incompetent to resist whatever was going on.

In a saccharine voice, as if to a child, my interrogator explained that there was research at my lab looking into human genetics. I knew that. She went on to talk about the weakness of the Y chromosome. I knew about that as well, from college biology. She left a silence for me to contemplate. Sluggishly I put two and two together. And exclaimed “You think they’re trying to exploit the weakness of the Y as a WEAPON!??” She smiled complacently, “There, I thought you knew really.”

“I didn’t, I don’t, I don’t believe it, not for a minute!”

“We believe biological weapons are very dangerous, and wicked. It’s the human race we’re thinking of. You don’t have children, yet. Just imagine being pregnant, wondering if you had a boy, in a world where most boy children didn’t even come to term. How does that feel?”

I closed my eyes. “What do you remember?” She demanded.

“I’m trying to think, to concentrate, to remember. Please give some time.” I prevaricated, trying to understand. I wondered why anyone might think such an abomination would make sense. Aggression. Men are more aggressive, on average. Fewer men could mean less aggression. Whoa, surely it can’t be true. Where did they get the idea from, was there any evidence for it? Keeping my eyes closed and trying to relax and think clearly I asked “I know nothing about this, do you have evidence for it?”

“We’re collecting the evidence, that’s why we’re talking to you. We believe there is work going on in your lab on it, and that you’ve worked on it. What do you remember?” I wasn’t fighting any more, probably the drug was affecting me. I wanted to know as much as they did. I believed in the purity of scientific research, for the good of humanity. But I couldn’t believe this crazy genetic weapon fantasy. It was only faintly possible that someone might think it a good idea.

“I just put genetic material through PCR. I see the results, I wouldn’t understand them if I did, I don’t even know what they’re looking for most of the time.”

“No, but you overhear things don’t you? What do remember about work on the Y chromosome?”

“I don’t if I worked with Y. There were some quite short printouts, now I think about it. They could have been it. But I didn’t overhear any chat about what it meant, at all!” She smiled with grim satisfaction. I realised I had given her just what she wanted to hear, but nothing was proved. She thanked me and they both went downstairs.

After everyone had left Mike came up with tea. We talked it all over. It was hard to believe the crazy idea of a weapon to destroy men, or boy babies in utero. Mike hadn’t been told anything about the group, except that we were now part of it, like it or not, and that they wanted to stop the research. Would they try to use me as a saboteur we wondered. Should we run away and change our identities?

I couldn’t help wanting to know more, if it was possible, if there really was any research on it. In America, Russia or China perhaps, but here in the UK? Surely not. Was that thought just sentimental patriotism? I tried to picture a world with few

men. Will we build massive sperm banks, is there going to be antidote? Will the population plummet, presumably it will, which it has to for people to live sustainably on earth. We began to see there was desperate logic in it. I could not make any difference to this bizarre plan, short of major sabotage, definitely not up my street! Should we go the police? Or to Wikileaks anonymously? What effect would leaking this make? We were both frightened.

Sleep was difficult. My thoughts went round and round. I felt very vulnerable.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEARLS

The Princess and the Pearls

For most of my life I was the Royal Court Writer, the job was no sinecure, everyone had to pull their weight. The bulk of my work was a sort of journalism, reporting events that the People should know about, keeping them in touch with plans and policies, Royal Tours, fashion and so on. Now that I've a bit more time on my hands, I'm writing some memoirs. So much has changed in our Kingdom in the last generation, and I wish to explain my small part in this progress we are so proud of. Naturally I have asked permission to publish this. The Queen demanded to read it, but to my relief she just handed it back laughing and said, "Thank God I've changed!" Of course He deserves more of the credit than I do.

Now the adventures are over and we live peacefully and quietly, rarely heard of abroad. For many centuries little changed, our Kings were benevolent, the People were fairly content, and there was no demand for change. My job was straightforward, if not particularly interesting, until the pretty little Princess Lily was about five years old. That was when she started asking for stories with herself as the heroine. The first one was great fun and the Princess was delighted with it. (These childhood tales are recorded elsewhere). When she got older she became more exacting and demanding. It all began so simply, it seemed a natural progression for a girl of her age to want a tale of how she gets married, and to want a happy ending. I rattled off a brief tale for her the next day and gave it to her in all innocence. If only I had known, I would have told the last story first, and not bothered with the early attempts! But I didn't know.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEARLS

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess. She had milk white skin and masses of fine red hair. Her father, the King decided it was time to consider her future. He wanted her to marry the handsome and eligible Prince Charming of the neighbouring Kingdom to the south. The Princess was quite happy with the match, but naturally insisted that he should prove his valour and ardour in a challenge. There were no dragons left to slaughter, or any impending disasters to avert. The best thing she could think of was that she should be brought the most beautiful pearls in the world.

Princes and commoners alike keenly accepted this challenge, looking for adventure and glamour. They each claimed a small purse from the King to help cover their expenses. After some months the contenders started trickling back, looking well tanned and more experienced in the ways of the world. The Princess received them eagerly, when she was not busy planning her trousseau. She admired many dozens of priceless pearls, and met fine, brave adventurers who entertained the Royal Court recounting their ordeals and triumphs. *(These are recorded in another volume, published at the marriage and biased in favour of the winning Prince.)*

The Princess spent a most enjoyable period of procrastination, calling back her favourites to try and impress and charm her a little more. She eventually decided that the pearls of the Prince originally intended for her were the most beautiful. Their soft delicate glow set off her fine skin in the most charming way. She really was enchanted with them, and also quite delighted with Prince Charming's amiability. She loved to listen to his adventures and descriptions of far off lands with different customs.

So she happily accepted her foremost suitor and the next day they were married with great rejoicing in both their Kingdoms. They moved to an elegant Castle not too far from the capital city where her parents dwelt, and lived happily ever after.

THE END

The Princess returns

I had nearly forgotten the beautiful Princess, for in spite of her very great beauty she was nevertheless quite forgettable. She came to me more than two years after her story was finished.

She wept bitterly and declared "The end was completely wrong and you must do something about it immediately. If you don't I'll expose you as a lousy Writer and all your work will be banned wherever my father, the King has influence!" I knew he would do no such thing, but I hated to think of her upsetting the old man with such silliness. I was well aware of the trouble she caused him and I naturally I did my best to calm her down and asked "What your problem exactly, Princess Lily?"

Eventually she became coherent over a cup of coffee and explained herself.

"Well, the pearl challenge was great fun, and the marriage and celebrations were good, I like our castle, and giving birth to our beautiful daughter was truly amazing. But we haven't lived happily ever after as you so neatly ended my story. In fact I'm completely fed up with Prince Charming. I'm bored with my limited and restricted life as a Princess in a comfortable Castle in a peaceful realm. I can see no escape and it's all your fault."

"I wrote it in all good faith," I insisted "as far as I can see there's no reason why you should not have lived happily ever after. You must realise that a writer's responsibility to his characters ends with the end of the story. How you lived after that was entirely your own affair." She just retorted angrily "Well, you can't see very far then, can you? You've no imagination whatever and have no business being a Writer. I'll see to it that you're not anyway!"

I have noticed that Princesses, particularly beautiful ones, are often stubborn and wilful. This young lady was as pig-headed as they come. No way would she allow me to disclaim responsibility for her happiness. I would have to do something if I was get any peace, and I had my career to consider. Our Kingdom, free from poverty though it was, had no Social Security System. I put on my thinking cap.

I reminded her that sometimes when young men take up a Royal Challenge for a Princess's hand it is a lowly but comely swineherd that wins, and that these matches are usually very successful. She looked at me hard, and I thought rather suspiciously. Then she got up and announced firmly "You are the Writer and it's up to you to sort out the mess you got me into!" She flounced out, only pausing at the door to remark spitefully, "The less I have to do with Writers the happier I'll be."

I could not help recalling the happy hours we had spent, she at my knee, listening wide-eyed to the latest adventure I had written for her. It did seem unfair. I wished I had thought of reminding her that it was she who had asked for a happy ending in the first place. I believe you cannot win with beautiful Princesses, so I got on with job.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEARLS, CONTINUED

After a suitable interval a beautiful baby girl was born to our Royal couple. There was much rejoicing in the land. Life went on, the Princess absorbed in motherhood, and Prince Charming concerned with Affairs of State. About two years after the birth, the Princess began to feel very despondent about her life, herself and even her handsome Prince. She was thinking that once the story is over, nothing interesting happens again. Being the mother of lively baby was fine, but was this all there is to life? She felt sure she must be missing something. Her husband gave her valuable gifts and hired extravagant entertainers to amuse her, but to no avail. He did everything he could think of to make her happy. Eventually she had to tell him. She explained that handsome though he was she could not love him. She found him tedious, boring, and annoying, she felt her life had ended already and she still in her twenties.

This dreadful revelation was the beginning of the end for our unfortunate Prince. As despair set in he took to drink. He let the Important Affairs of State slip, so the wonderful highway improvement programme he had started with such enthusiasm, petered out into a potholed track. He lost the healthy tan he had gained

abroad, he lost weight and vitality. The Royal Physician visited him every day and prescribed him tonics and fresh air. He drank the tonics but felt too weak to take the fresh air. He had no interest in food, even though a new chef was brought from Paris to make his diet exciting and nutritious. He got thinner and poorer day by day until within a year he died of cirrhosis of the liver.

After a period of mourning the King himself issued another challenge: The man who could make his sad but still beautiful daughter happy should marry her. Many suitors came and went with tricks and trifles. Dukes and swineherds, Princes and blacksmiths came and courted her with music and with jokes, with funny faces and athletic feats, with conjuring and storytelling. She often very much enjoyed these entertainments, but once the party turn was over the suitors were all as boring and tedious as the first, late Prince.

She was no longer as easily impressed as she had been the first time round. Her outlook had become so jaded that she was very hard to impress at all. The King asked the Princess whether any of this batch of men made her happy. She had to reply that could never marry someone just because he could put on a good show occasionally. She explained that this time she was only going to settle for a kindred spirit, someone she could feel close to and admire for his inner qualities rather than a polished exterior.

The King had noticed that walking about the formal gardens and the wilder parts beyond was one of the only pastimes that gave his lovely daughter any peace of mind. He ordered some redesigning of the Castle grounds to make them more interesting for her. Actually she rather resented the intrusion because she went out to be on her own and think, to see the wild birds and animals. She attempted to tell the Head Gardener how she would like it, but he didn't seem to understand. She started to wander further off into woods where she could reach tranquillity. Sometimes she would bring breadcrumbs to tempt the nuthatches out of the trees and watch them from a bush where she could not easily be seen.

One day she spread crumbs out and was just about to sit on her silk cushion when she started in surprise, there was someone there already! He jumped up in confusion, blushing and apologising, "I'm sorry your Highness, I didn't mean to scare you." He didn't want to incur her Highnesses displeasure, for everyone knew how easy that was these days.

"I didn't mean to scare you either! What you doing?"

"I'm er, just watching the birds. It's my lunch break and I don't have to be back for quarter of an hour, but I'll leave you in peace your Highness." He started to walk away from her, backwards of course, and bowing as did some, until he crashed into a bramble bush. Lily laughed, then covered her mouth in embarrassment. The young man laughed as well, as he disentangled himself.

"Funny thing is," the princess explained "I'm here watching the birds as well, what a coincidence. Actually I just come to escape too, you know, it's out of everyone's way."

"I am going, really." He said hurriedly.

"You're not everyone, who are you anyway?"

"Just an under gardener, really not anyone at all."

"You have a name?" The under gardener bowed wonderingly and raised himself before answering uncertainly

"My name is Roderick."

"Look, Roderick, I bought some cake crumbs, where shall we put them?"

"Shall I do it?" Respectfully he took the bag of crumbs from her and scattered them in the clearing. He gestured to a good place for sitting and carefully arranged her cushion for her. They sat together in a companionable silence, occasionally nudging one another to point out a bird that had alighted nearby. Before long the gardener had to return to work, the Princess walked on through the woods enjoying the bright new colours of the natural world.

The next day she found herself looking out for the quiet gardener, and she made her way to the nuthatch place when she knew it would be his lunchtime. Again they sat quietly together, the gardener dared not say much for fear of it being the wrong thing, and she just did not feel chatty.

The next day the gardener felt a little braver. "I know, shall I show you another place?" She assented and followed him. He led her along a path he had cut out of the undergrowth to a tiny stream where birds came to drink and bathe. She loved it. Over the next few days the gardener and the Princess became firm friends. He made a lovely rustic hide at their favourite place.

Returning to the Castle one lunchtime she was met by the King, he said jovially "Well my girl, it looks as if you've found your winner, who's the lucky man?" She looked at him rather blankly, wondering what he was on about. Then she remembered the challenge and replied "Well, I suppose I have found him, but not where you'd expect. In fact I he didn't take the challenge, he's probably already married. He is very nice though."

"Well tell me all about him my dear."

"I don't know much about him, except he's an under gardener called Roderick. But he hasn't even shown that he finds me attractive, let alone considered marrying me!"

"Of course he'll marry you, you are the most desirable and Beautiful Princess."

The gardener agreed to the marriage, though of course in his humility nothing had been further from his mind. The wedding was a quiet affair and went off without a hitch. They moved to a spacious apartment in the King's palace. The Princess and he were quite content with sharing their common interests and not getting in each other's way. Their lives were uneventful but pleasant.

THE END THE END THE END

The Princess is back again.

After the wedding the Princess waited only a week before coming round to my garret again. I groaned quietly and asked her, "What's the matter with him?"

"Oh nothing's the matter with him, he's wonderful in fact, you couldn't have done better. The only thing is, it's not finished."

"So what do you want to happen then?" I asked.

"Well," she sounded quite apologetic this time, "it's just not good enough, I did notice that you tried to disguise it a bit, but you must admit that basically it's still the same old happily ever after stuff." She was right of course.

"So do you want an unhappy ending or what?"

"No, you've missed the point. I won't feel secure unless I know what's going to happen. I want the rest of my life spelt out, so I can't get into bad trouble like before. Just give a bit more detail so there's no room for things to go wrong."

"That's all is it your Highness, anything else?"

"No, that's fine," she said gaily as she walked to the door, totally ignoring the irony "Thanks a lot!"

"I'll show her!" I thought, "If she doesn't want a conventional happy ending, I'll give her unconventional one."

THE PRINCESS LIVES ON

The Princess and the Gardener, like any couple have some good times and some bad times. The small things that annoy people anywhere got out of hand, for these two expected nothing but the best for themselves. Finally our kind gardener threw a hideous tantrum and smashed the Royal apartments to smithereens. Furiously they told one another they could not possibly live together a minute longer. Tearfully they clung to one another and declared undying love. They talked all night and eventually decide to live apart but remain lovers, and that way appreciate the best in each other.

This they did, and I could easily say they lived happily ever after, but I don't think I will. Although their lives thereafter are not very interesting I will relate it anyway.

Princess Lily moved back to her own Castle. The Gardener was promoted to Head Gardener, so he was no longer the kept man of the Princess but an independent freeman. He had rather a nice house with the job, across the lawns and beyond the shrubbery. Often she would walk the grounds with him and admire the plants he was growing, and sometimes they watched the birds together and made love in the woods. Sometimes she would call at his house in the evening and sometimes he would go up to the Castle. And sometimes they would leave each other alone.

I really thought I had seen the last of her complaints this time, but I was wrong. She was contented alright, but contented was not really what she wanted to be after all. She was bored again and now she wanted a little more spice in her life. She thought the life of a Beautiful Princess should be interesting and eventful, that she should have some influence in the Realm beyond how the fashionable ladies wore their hair and the current length of dresses.

Who's the one without any imagination now? I asked myself, though I didn't dare say anything. I was as cross as usual, out of habit, but I couldn't help noticing that she was growing a little more polite. I sat down and thought.

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEARLS, CONTINUED

The Princess had quite forgotten the old challenge for the most beautiful pearls in the world. That had been years ago and a bit disappointing in the end. But it turned out not to be the end. Another Prince turned up with some more pearls. He

came from a foreign land far to the north. He had been to the four corners of the world and back again. He knew no other contender had the most beautiful pearls in the world as he had them himself.

The Princess's guards let him in for a laugh, thinking she would turn him out in disgrace for coming so late. She didn't laugh though, this Prince was different to the others. She could see straight away that his air of assurance was not the ignorant arrogance she was so used to, but a modest confidence born out of experience. He did not drop to his knee when brought into her presence as most people did. It was not pride that prevented him, his attitude was that of an equal who was treating her with natural respect. He had the worn, pale look of one who has been ill, and the far away look in his eyes of one who has seen many things. He immediately evoked a desire in her to hold him her arms and stroke his silken fair hair.

When she saw the pearls she was completely amazed. She was by now something of a connoisseur of pearls and these were truly remarkable. She had never seen any as perfect as these. They seemed to shine with a light of their own. They had no colour whatever and appeared to be made of thought or light rather than of substance. She knew at once that she could never wear them, as no one would notice her own beauty if it was in the shadow of such perfection.

When the Prince realised that the challenge had actually been won years ago and was long since forgotten, he hoped for a handsome reward, a comfortable bed for the night, and to leave for home in the morning. The Princess on the other hand did not want this beautiful stranger just disappearing from her life so easily. She thought that as he almost, still could have claimed her hand in marriage, he should stay and enjoy her grace and favour for a while at least, and provide her with a romantic interlude, but he declined to do so.

She found that the only way she to keep the reluctant Prince near her was to imprison him in the Deep Dark Dungeon. She had often thought it a shame it was never used. She drafted in the large and muscular State Executioner himself to guard him. This was quite convenient as Nigel was never busy, and his quarters were nearby. She gave Prince Tony some paper and pens, hoping that he would write some poetry in admiration of her great beauty, she thought he looked poetic. Instead he wrote a letter to his mother telling her of his terrible plight, which Nigel helpfully smuggled out. He awaited liberation by his country's army. The King's own Guards intercepted this letter. The cautious King was aware that his daughter's Guard were a slaphappy lot, and rather than criticise her management he kept some of his own men around to discretely oversee the affairs of the Castle. He was shocked to discover what she was doing, for he hated wars even more than he hated poverty. He hastened to the Castle with the letter in his hand. He made her promise to release the Prince, but as she pointed out, their army was not on its way, as the letter was never sent, so there was really no hurry.

Since he had arrived the Princess has been trying to make friends with her unwilling guest. Actually he rather liked her, although she did not realise that because he so frequently argued with her, which she was not used to. He admired her spirit and determination more than her beauty, and she was not sure if she liked that, or whether she should feel insulted.

One nice afternoon she thought it would be lovely to talk to him in the bower of the Rose Garden. She had Nigel shackle a heavy iron ball to his fine ankle, and handcuff him to her. She wanted him close. She asked him politely "Tell me about how you found those wonderful pearls. They must have been terribly expensive."

"Expensive in life, yes Lily. I was in the Far East. I asked and looked, and eventually discovered a village on a small island, where the divers were particularly skilled. They showed me three of the ones you now have. I said if they could match them with another dozen or more that I would give them some vegetable seeds. Understandably"

"What on earth made you bring seeds with you?" she interrupted.

"Oh, that was Mother's idea, they were light enough, so I didn't argue. Anyway, the women grew the seeds while the divers continued their search. I was there for months, and some very excellent salads came up. I enjoyed something familiar, but to these people they were really exotic. Later some root vegetables grew, and they liked those too, especially since some of them could be stored."

"What did you mean, expensive in life?" Lily inquired.

"Two experienced divers the fathers of young children, the husbands of good women, died in finding your collection. They went deeper than even they could manage. A third was soon to be married, he had become a dear friend to me. He somehow got trapped underwater, his body turned up on the mainland much later. His girlfriend was distraught, as you can imagine, Lily. The Head of the village tried to make me marry her. It was not easy to refuse, but I had to. It would not have been fair to her. I think that makes them priceless, don't you? I felt quite cursed by the stupid Quest. It was a selfish though wonderfully interesting adventure. I just wanted to see the world and enjoy myself, and I deprived these wonderful people of their best men." She tried to look into his blue eyes, but he kept them averted. She could see that he was having trouble holding back tears.

The Princess wept in sorrow. She thought she knew a lot about pearls, that they were found in oysters, in the bottom of the ocean by brave men with powerful lungs. She misunderstood his intention and thought he was scorning her desires and her avarice. Tony genuinely wanted to help her to see the world as he knew it really is, to understand the hunger and misery that people suffer in the world. He wanted her to realise that freedom, love and generosity are worth far more than ephemeral beauty. She shouted for the Executioner and told him to take the Prince back to the dungeon. He undid the handcuffs, as she walked off she pretended not notice that he removed the ball and chain as well.

She began to understand her own selfishness. She could not put off releasing her prisoner indefinitely, the staff had made their disapproval clear, but neither could she bear to let him go. After a long conversation in which they understood each other very well, she locked him in his cell and left after tearfully throwing the key in through the bars. She went off to mourn her loss in the woods.

The fair Prince let himself out took an excursion around the Castle and the gardens. The staff of the Royal Household was most kind and welcoming to him, to make up for the Princess's unreasonable treatment. The more he saw of how the household and the Kingdom ran, and the more he found out about his lovely captor, the more interested he became.

The next day the Princess wandered sadly down to the Dungeon to indulge her grief and found to her surprise and delight that he had locked himself back in his cell and was sound asleep. They became the best of friends.

He continued to inhabit the Dungeon cell (with a little furniture brought in). It was a while before anyone noticed that stairs had been put in, which linked Prince Tony's dungeon with the State Executioner's apartment above. The Prince sat at the Royal table for meals and in the Council chamber for meetings when he felt inclined.

He was made Chief Advisor for Philosophy and Religion, a post created especially for him.

Princess Lily's relationship with the Head Gardener was still flourishing, so she and the foreign Prince remained just good friends even if she did sometimes have unchaste thoughts about him. Gradually over the years he succeeded in broadening her outlook on life, and improving her understanding of world politics. His influence was felt throughout the Kingdom, social reforms were introduced which gave all Subjects a voice in the Government, a free Public Health Scheme, and free education for those that wanted it. He always discussed his ideas with her and encouraged her to develop her own. With Nigel's encouragement and support a completely new penal system was organised, and capital punishment banned completely except for cases Treason.

At the King's death Lily became Queen. She was the first woman to take an active part in Government, she involved herself increasingly in women's affairs and improved their lot considerably, for which she was much loved and appreciated. Such a life can be described as happy, as she was always busy and never bored.

THE END!

PS. Pensions are now available for the over sixties, so I have retired to a lovely new development for retired Courtiers. I am no longer expected to accept Royal commissions but write solely for my own interest and satisfaction.

PPS I'm not sure if Lily ever did fully comprehend the nature of the relationship between the State Executioner and Prince Tony, I would like to add that they lived happily ever after.